

Editor
North Dakota Daily Newspapers
Feb. 20, 2003

To the editor:

Beginning February 24, public and private health care workers across North Dakota will join health professionals throughout the nation in receiving smallpox vaccinations. As we begin this process, I feel it's important for everyone to understand the issues surrounding smallpox.

Smallpox is one of the most devastating diseases known to humanity. Throughout history, smallpox probably caused more deaths worldwide than any other infectious disease. Even among populations that had been exposed to smallpox for centuries, as many as 30 percent of those who became infected died from the disease. Those who survived had lifelong immunity, although many were blind or suffered deep, pitted scars, especially on the face.

Smallpox is a serious disease. But, it's one that public health successfully dealt with in the past.

In the 1960s, public health officials worldwide joined in the fight to rid the world of smallpox through vaccination and disease investigation. The last naturally acquired case of smallpox in the world occurred in Africa in 1977. In May 1980, the World Health Assembly declared the world free of smallpox, and routine vaccination ended.

Unfortunately, the threat of smallpox is not completely gone. Today, we have a new concern – the use of smallpox as a bioterrorism weapon.

Although the probability of an intentional release of smallpox virus is low, the consequences are so great that the state and the nation must be prepared. That's why North Dakota has joined the country to prepare for such an event.

Beginning this week, teams of volunteer public and private health care providers in North Dakota will begin to receive the smallpox vaccine. By protecting those people who would be initially called upon to treat a smallpox patient or investigate the cause of the disease, we are further strengthening our ability to protect the public. Not only that, but some members of the military indicate that we also create a deterrent to attack if we are prepared.

Smallpox response teams composed of public health workers and health care professionals will receive the vaccine first. This means we will have teams available to care for potential smallpox patients, to investigate potential cases, and to administer vaccine as necessary.

A great deal of concern has been raised about the side effects of the smallpox vaccine. These side effects are not very common, but can be severe. Therefore, people who receive the vaccine will be screened carefully for any health conditions that increase the risk for side effects. People who potentially could experience adverse reactions because of a health condition will not be vaccinated.

North Dakota's nurses, doctors and public health professionals are caring, committed people who are dedicated to providing the care their communities need. I extend my heartfelt thanks to those who have volunteered to receive the smallpox vaccine and to serve on the state's smallpox response team.

In the absence of a smallpox case, the federal government is not recommending that members of the general public be vaccinated at this time. It's important to remember that vaccine given within four days of exposure to smallpox can prevent the disease or lessen the symptoms. Should a clear threat or an actual outbreak occur anywhere, the United States has enough smallpox vaccine to vaccinate everyone in America.

Smallpox deserves our respect. Should it return through an act of terrorism, I have every confidence that we have the knowledge and resources to destroy the virus again.

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